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## ABSTRACT

Responding to a rise in hate crimes directed toward persons of Arab descent and Muslims before and during the Gulf War, the Los Angeles County (California) Commission on Human Relations held a hearing. The commission heard presentations by representatives of the Arab and Muslim communities, law enforcement, schools, and social science, and concerned citizens. The following findings are presented: (1) an increase in death threats; (2) threats on mosques; (3) increased media coverage of hate crimes; (4) a reluctance by Arabs and Muslims to report hate crimes; (5) negative stereotypes in the media; and (6) little coverage of the Middle East in school curricula. In recent years the commission has taken the following actions to reduce anti-Arab and anti-Muslim bigotry: (1) convened this hearing; (2) published a booklet; (3) involved Arabs and Muslims in other hearings; (4) held a meeting about the meaning of Islam; (5) included Arabs and Muslims on key committees; (6) provided opportunities for Arab and Muslim community representatives to address the commission; and (7) responded to hate crimes. Brief summaries of the testimony of 10 witnesses are included. (JB)

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VIOLENCE AND INTIMIDATION:  
RISING BIGOTRY TOWARD ARABS AND MUSLIMS

Report on a Public Hearing by the  
Los Angeles County Commission on Human Relations

April 1991

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The Commission thanks the presenters for their contributions and the State Museum of Science and Industry for the use of Mark Taper Hall.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Arab Americans and Muslim Americans are a vital part of our community. Approximately 150,000 persons of Arab descent and 200,000 persons of the Muslim faith now reside in Los Angeles County.

Bigotry and violence directed against Arabs and Muslims increased markedly with escalation of conflict in the Middle East.

In the first seven months of 1990, 7 hate crimes were committed against Arabs in Los Angeles County, as many as in each of the two preceding years. In the last five months of 1990, after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, 19 hate crimes were recorded.

There were no anti-Muslim incidents during the first seven months of 1990. Twelve such crimes were committed during the last five months of the year.

These figures document only hate crimes, violations of the law. Acts of verbal abuse, harassment, and intimidation are much more common than violations of law, and are uncounted. Many Arab Americans and Muslim Americans do not report either hate crimes or non-criminal abuses, out of fear of retaliation or for cultural reasons.

Reports of hate crimes and other hate incidents continued to escalate during the first two months of 1991.

On Thursday, March 14, 1991 the Los Angeles County Commission on Human Relations held a public hearing on "Violence and Intimidation: Rising Bigotry Toward Arabs and Muslims." The State Museum of Science and Industry provided the hearing site in Mark Taper Hall.

The Commission heard presentations by representatives of the Arab and Muslim communities, law enforcement, schools, and social science, and concerned citizens. Speakers were invited to say what they wished, but to recognize that issues of international relations were beyond the authority of the Commission. They were asked to focus on the issues of greatest concern to the people of Los Angeles County.

In order to make information available as quickly as possible and to better convey the personal experiences, distress, and heartfelt perceptions of presenters, the Commission has adopted a format different from that of other hearing reports. This report contains a summary of each presenter's testimony, rather than incorporating relevant testimony into sections by issues and problem areas.

Testimony was used by the Commission to assess the extent and severity of the problem. Commission Findings and Actions are presented in Section II of this report.

Section III of this report presents summaries of key points made by presenters. Opinions recorded are those of the presenters and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Commission.

Written and tape-recorded testimonies and submittals are on file at the Human Relations Commission office and are available on request.

## II. FINDINGS AND ACTIONS

### A. FINDINGS

1. The number of hate crimes against Arab Americans and Muslim Americans has increased markedly, to include not only vandalism and physical violence, but also death threats.
2. Mosques have been threatened by people who blame Muslims for problems in the Middle East.
3. In recent months the media has become more sensitive to reports of hate crimes and discrimination against Arabs and Muslims, and has increased coverage and educational pieces, while at the same time continuing to foster misunderstandings.
4. Parents, media, and society teach prejudices to children.
5. The infrastructure of family life that is essential to the well-being of Arab and Muslim children has been violently interrupted by not just the Gulf Crisis, but also by continuing discrimination, harassment, and hate crimes.
6. Many Arabs and Muslims, and particularly Arab and Muslim children, are reluctant to report hate crimes and hate incidents because of cultural influences or fear of retaliation.
7. Negative portrayals of Arabs and Muslims in film, television, cartoons, and comics foster stereotypes.
8. Terrorist acts committed by a very small minority of Arabs in the Middle East are widely publicized and all Arabs and Muslims in the United States are erroneously condemned by the general public.
9. The tendency to generalize about people originating from a world region, accentuated in a time of crisis, has perpetuated ignorance about diversity among Middle Easterners and Muslims in the United States.
10. There is little public education about the Middle East and the heritage of Middle Easterners in the United States.
11. Some Federal, State, and local officials have taken positions against anti-Arab and anti-Muslim discrimination.
12. Arab and Muslim hate crime victims often experience feelings of shame and humiliation as a result of the attacks upon them.

## B. ACTIONS

In this report, the Commission offers no recommendations. All recommendations appropriate to alleviating violence, intimidation, and bigotry have been made in the Commission's hate crime reports and other hearing reports, and all such recommendations have been supported by the Board of Supervisors.

The Commission has, in recent years, taken a number of actions designed to decrease anti-Arab, anti-Muslim bigotry, and to involve Arabs and Muslims in the Commission's work. The Commission has:

- \* Convened this hearing to focus specifically on rising bigotry toward Arabs and Muslims in Los Angeles County.
- \* Published a booklet, Salaam Means Peace: An Introduction to Arab Americans, which is available to the public.
- \* Involved Arabs and Muslims in other Commission hearings.
- \* Held a Commission meeting at the Islamic Center of Southern California, and heard speakers on the meaning of Islam.
- \* Included Arab and Muslim community representatives in the Commission's Emerging Groups Committee and in the Network Against Hate Crime.
- \* Provided opportunities for Arab and Muslim community representatives to address the Commission at its regular meetings, its hearings, and other events.
- \* Responded to numerous hate crimes directed at Arabs and Muslims.

### III. SUMMARIES OF TESTIMONY

**Edward James Olmos**  
Actor, Activist

- On the day that this crisis started in August, it seemed that in our attitudes towards people of Muslim religion and Arab culture changed immensely. We forgot that just days before these were the people who lived next door to us, whose children played with our children.

As soon as the situation in the Persian Gulf started, it seemed to give people a green light to start to hate people of Muslim religion and Arab culture. I found it devastating.

- This hate is the responsibility of our community, where hate crimes became relevant very quickly. The second day of the war two restaurants were blown up and burned in the Sherman Oaks/Encino area where I live. I found it to be an unbelievable act of hatred. It really brings to the forefront the need for us to take a stand.
- The most important undertaking today would be to formulate a structure within our school systems to educate our children, starting at a very young age. They need to have an understanding of what Arabs and Muslims have given to humanity. That is the only deterrent we have toward bigotry and hatred, to educate our children to understand that these are human beings who must not be treated as animals or something less.
- My medium, film, is probably the worse perpetrator of injustices that I've ever seen. It doesn't balance itself out, ever. It only thinks of the dollar; it does not think of the sense, ever. It's sad that Arab Americans have been portrayed as something less than human.

**Vicki Tamoush, Chair**  
Network Against Hate Crime

- There have been a number of telephone death threats, all of which refer to the Gulf Crisis or to Saddam Hussein in some way.
- There was an incident in Pasadena of three cars owned by Arabs all having been stoned with five and six inch

stones on a single night in the same general neighborhood. The owners of the cars did not know one another and there were no clues.

- We have heard of acid being poured on a bakery, destroying all of the building and all of its machinery.
- There have been physical assaults against Muslim women who are so identified by the scarves that they wear to cover their hair.
- A store was burned, and emblazoned on the sidewalk and in the surrounding areas was "Go home (blank) Arabs," and other obscenities.
- At Burbank High School a Palestinian student who immigrated here from Jordan was removed from her classroom for disagreeing with a non-Arab student on the Gulf Crisis, while the non-Arab student was allowed to remain in the classroom.
- I have had the unfortunate experience of coming home to my apartment to find it broken into and a very nasty racist note left for me while nothing was taken from the apartment.
- I've had my car vandalized. I've pulled my car out of the parking lot where I live to find underneath it a dissected bird accompanied by a racist note. I have had over 200 telephone calls threatening my life and the lives of my family, naming family members, including those who do not live in the same area that I live in.
- My family has received death threats that name me and specify my political activities and beliefs as the reasons for their victimization.
- I have been followed and I have been under surveillance, and I have been visited by the FBI.
- I want you to feel that this is a matter of urgency. Children are changing their names, legally, through the Courts, at twice the rate of before August second.
- This Commission can make public and non-public statements to law enforcement to reiterate what was given them in the mandate in July, to document hate crimes and to provide in-service training. We (the Arab and Muslim communities) could provide people to give that training in any part of the County, and we

would be very happy to do that. We can provide translators when there is a language gap that is preventing information from getting to the Commission or to the public.

- The Commission could encourage L.A. County Schools, the Office of Education, the Los Angeles Unified School District, and other school districts in Los Angeles County to offer not just in-service training for teachers and administrators, but to bring proper, pure, truthful, factual curricula about the Arab world into the classroom, without fear, without apologies. Simply to present this culture, these nationalities, as they exist.

Nisar Hai, Vice President  
United Muslims of America

- There are about a half million Muslims and 44 Islamic mosques in Southern California.
- Right after the first Iraqi missile attack on Tel Aviv, everybody who had the last name of Hussein got a threatening telephone call. They were told that it was the FBI calling to find out if they knew of any Iraqis. When they reported the calls to the local police department they were told, "We can do nothing, just change your phone number, and make it unlisted."
- In Long Beach a White American woman who dresses in the traditional Islamic way with scarf and long dresses was in a drug store to get medication when the clerk called the manager. The manager escorted her out of the store for no reason other than her identity as a Muslim. A couple of days later, when she had rented a carpet shampoo machine, three police cars surrounded her and her daughters (who also dress traditionally) and took them in for one hour of interrogation.
- In Monrovia a Pakistani man began getting threatening calls before the Gulf War started. When he hung decorative lights on his house for a birthday party, the city officials cited him for a number of code violations. The violations were unsubstantiated, so I helped him get legal assistance.
- In Hawthorne two American-born citizens, sons of a White American mother and Pakistani father were roughed up by police when they made a wrong turn. They were repeatedly asked "Where are you from?" "What's your nationality?" even though they had already stated that they were Americans.

- In Hollywood an Iraqi family that had been living in their house for seven years had their home searched by Sheriff's deputies although the search warrant named a person who left the house seven years ago. The family is not willing file a complaint because they are afraid.
- An incident that is very common is that of a Palestinian gentleman who was given a threatening hate letter at his place of employment with the knowledge of the management. His employer is a major chain store.
- When the FBI started questioning Arab Americans and Muslim Americans about terrorism I was the first to call the White House comment line. I was told to complain to the local authorities. I replied that the President started this war, and that he must say that the Muslims and Arabs in this country are citizens of this country and there should be no bigotry or acts of racism against them. It took about a week for the President to come out and make that statement.

**Don Bustany, President**  
American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee

- An atmosphere exists that allows hate crimes to happen.
- Some hate crimes are committed by agencies of government. The Immigration and Naturalization Service, for example, began four years ago a campaign to eject seven Palestinians and one Kenyan for exercising the same rights that American citizens exercise. They were green card holders. The crime they committed was not being American citizens.
- The State Department of Motor Vehicles deemed offensive a personalized license plate reading "4 Jihad" that a man had bought for his son, whose name was Jihad (meaning "striving for excellence").
- The Immigration and Naturalization Service contemplated repeating a hate crime committed against Japanese Americans when it prepared a facility at Oakdale, Louisiana, in which it could intern 5,000 persons.
- The FBI conducted interviews of Arab Americans that were, it said, to reassure the Arab American community that the FBI was concerned with our safety, and to gather information about terrorism. The last people in the world to know about terrorism would have been those Arab business and community leaders targeted for FBI

interviews, because they would have the most to lose by any such knowledge. They would be the first to report it. There are theories about why the FBI conducted these interviews, the main theory being to keep the Arab community quiet and to prevent protest against the war.

- Reluctance to report hate crimes is particularly a factor in schools, where the victims are the kids. In some cases, teachers have the wrong information and have prejudices themselves. In other cases, out of sight of the teachers, kids are subjected to the cruelty of their age peers, who hear things at home and come and say, "Go home to your Uncle Saddam," and worse. The kids don't want to make more waves on their campus. Some of them have changed their names to avoid the viciousness.
- Terrorist acts committed by Arabs get wide publicity and the general public condemns not only the perpetrators, but all Arabs.
- Some in the Arab leadership do not have a good sense of public relations and public image as it works in this Western culture and society.
- Because of foreign political events that villify Arabs, impressions are created here in our population. And that is another cause that justifies, in some people's minds, committing hate crimes against Arabs.

**Medhi Bozorgmehr**, Assistant to the Director  
UCLA Von Grunebaum Center for Near Eastern Studies

- Although there is a general tendency on the part of the majority population to lump minority groups originating from a world region together (e.g., Asians, Hispanics), this tendency is accentuated in times of crisis. Often immigrants from a country with a hostile regime to the U.S. become easy targets of discrimination and prejudice, despite the fact that immigration is sometimes a sign of disapproval of the regime, especially for political refugees.
- Arab nationalism, Arab-Israeli wars, and anti-Arab discrimination in the U.S. have all contributed to the emergence of an all-encompassing Arab identity despite a diverse background.
- Americans can not distinguish Arabs from other ethnic groups originating in the Middle East, and assume that all Middle Easterners are Arabs and Muslims.

- Middle Easterners are one of the most diverse minority groups in the United States. National origin, ethnicity, language, cultural heritage, and religion are some of the most basic distinguishing factors among Middle Easterners. Arabs, Iranians, Armenians, and Turks are different ethnic categories, each with its own distinctive language. Christians, Jews, and Muslims are the largest religious groups among Middle Easterners in the U.S.
- Political reasons are the major cause of emigration for the second wave of Arab migration. The new Arab immigrants are educated and include many professionals. Muslims constitute a larger share of these migrants than Christians. This migration is increasingly directed towards the West Coast, California, and Los Angeles.
- Population estimates place the number of Arabs at three million and Muslims at between three and five million in the U.S. The difficulty in estimating the population of Muslims is that the U.S. Censuses do not include a question on religion.
- In general, Middle Easterners are highly educated, but the level of education varies among the subgroups. These relatively high levels of education translate into a high occupational profile among Middle Easterners in the U.S.
- Entrepreneurship is related to discrimination in at least two ways. First, discrimination in the general economy can turn job seekers to self-employment. In turn visibly ethnic businesses may become targets of vandalism in times of crisis.
- The starting point is to educate the public about the Middle East and the heritage of Middle Easterners in the U.S. Although some of this education takes place during times of crisis such as the Gulf War, it is not as effective, since in such times emotions run high. Middle Easterners, especially, can be effective teachers, in presenting the perspectives of their ethnic communities. The UCLA Center for Near Eastern Studies holds intensive summer workshops for elementary and secondary school teachers interested in the Middle East.

**John Hall, Coordinator**  
Counseling Services  
Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD)

- Prior to the outbreak of the Persian Gulf War the LAUSD had published an anti-slur/no name-calling resolution. That resolution was reactivated and sent out to all schools because many students in the schools are of Arab and Muslim heritage and ancestry, and may be subject to slurs and discrimination. Bulletins were also sent out to make students and adults aware that not only were there students who had relatives serving in the Middle East Crisis, or who may have been called to service, there were also students whose family members were among the victims in the Middle East, or victims of "retribution" here.
- Elementary level support groups address conflict resolution. A psychologist is assigned full-time to coordinate a program for Crisis Resolution and Management and Peer Counseling. Through the program students are made aware that many students - the majority in many schools - are from countries other than the United States.
- One English as a Second Language teacher stated that Arab and Muslim students reported being verbally attacked. Latino students were also being called "Saddam."
- I believe that the most effective and certainly the most cost effective modality to addressing issues of multicultural awareness would be in the elementary schools. I recommend that we do more as far as the instructional program relative to the issues. Our office put together a packet on issues concerning the Arab and Muslim communities. We need to go beyond that.

**Christopher Loop, Agent**  
Glendale Police Department

- The Glendale Police Department provides a model for establishing response to hate crimes which we have made available to other agencies. We would hope that they would adopt our procedures.
- The population of Glendale is to a great extent made up of immigrants from other countries. It has been estimated that some thirty to forty thousand members of

our community are Armenian. We are aware that many of the immigrants and citizens of our City are from Iraq, Iran, and other countries of the Middle East.

- Because of experiences with the military and law enforcement in their home countries, immigrants may have a very strong tendency to shy away from reporting crimes to the police. They have a very strong mistrust of the police. It behooves us to establish credibility with those communities.
- Law enforcement has a great responsibility to make the inroads and build community trust, to go out and address these groups.
- A portion of the Glendale Police Department's policy on hate crime is to take "a proactive role in promoting peace and harmony within the community, and insuring that rights guaranteed by the State laws and the U.S. Constitution are protected for all citizens regardless of their race, color, ethnicity, religion, or sexual orientation. When such rights are infringed upon by violence, intimidation, threats, or other harassment, the Department will use every necessary resource to rapidly and decisively identify the perpetrators, arrest them, and bring them before the Court. It shall be the policy of this Department to bring the investigative and enforcement forces of the Police Department into quick action following any and all reported or observed incidents of violence, or threats directed at an individual, institution, or business, motivated all or in part because of race, ethnicity, religion, or sexual orientation."
- Many other communities and law enforcement agencies faced with hate and bias crime problems have asked for copies of our hate crime policy. We have also provided testimony before commissions and seminars.

**Frank Sundstedt, Head Deputy District Attorney**  
Organized Crime/Anti-Terrorist Division  
Office of the District Attorney

- District Attorney Ira Reiner is committed to the implementation and prosecution of hate crime legislation. A number of things that he has done in that respect are: a video public service announcement; press conferences, the most recent of which was held at the offset of the air invasion in the Persian Gulf Crisis; and the assignment of hate crime prosecution to the Organized Crime/Anti-Terrorist Division.

- The key to hate crime statutes is the prosecution of persons who would injure, interfere, or intimidate another person's free exercise of his or her constitutional rights because of that person's race, color, religion, sexual orientation, or place of origin.
- The most recent hate crime legislation allows some crimes that earlier were punishable only as misdemeanors to be filed and punishable as felonies.
- With respect to prosecution of hate crimes, one of the basic problems that my office has is the failure of people to report these crimes, and the lack of ability to present credible competent evidence.
- The District Attorney's Office is currently prosecuting and will seek the death penalty for a murder that was committed because of hatred of the victim's race. That case is the first in which that special circumstance has been implemented.
- We are prosecuting Tom Metzger, the nationally known hate monger, for crossburning. We also have pending in the Criminal Courts a felony filing as a result of a bomb-threat against the Islamic community. We will also prosecute a brutal, vicious, hammer attack that apparently was committed because the assailant believed that the victim was an Iraqi.
- Detection of all crime is inadequate for a number of reasons. Detection of vandalism is woefully inadequate because these crimes are committed under cover of night. The public bears a major responsibility to come forward with information.

**Ilham Al-Sarraf, Psychotherapist**

- Social conditioning breeds fear of the unknown. Infants are born without fears. They fall prey to parents, media, society, who handicap them with prejudice.
- Fear and avoidance become a way of coping for a child. This would imprison him or her with a cultural blindness, cultural biases. It begins the process of a social phobia that translates to hate crime, the acting out of the coping mechanism of fight or flight.
- My son was badly beaten when he tried to save a parking attendant who was being attacked. The attackers knew my son is Arab. They called him about every derogatory

word in the dictionary. The attack bred in him a lot of anger an urge to retaliate, a wish to get even with the world. This experience has fostered in him behavior that is totally foreign to his character. This is how we breed hate crime.

- We find one thing common to perpetrators. They have very low impulse control. They do not think before they act. They act on an unchecked belief system. The impulse control triggers very quickly into reaction rather than action, and that is very sad.
- Fear sometimes determines our behavior toward another human being. To perpetrators, bigotry, discrimination, and prejudices justify destructiveness.
- Physiological symptoms of psychological trauma include insomnia, hyper-alertness, headaches, sexual inhibition, nightmares, digestive disturbances, respiratory disorders, back trouble, weight problems, and restlessness. Psychological symptoms include phobia, recurrent thoughts, suppression, anger, fear, depression, isolation, guilt, and blunted emotions. Marital discord and family tension may include separation, disruption of routines, violence, and even divorce.
- Most Arabs and Muslims cope with the psychological trauma of hate crime by way of withdrawal and isolation, disassociation, minimizing, and grandiosity to cover the inferiority feeling of the shame and humiliation. They come from countries where self-expression can only bring a worse plight to them, imprisonment.

Salam Al Marayati, Director  
Muslim Public Affairs Council

- There are a number of hate crime cases that will never be heard about -- those whereby students are stifled. Students' parents are telling their children not to speak to Muslims, or not to speak to Arabs. These parents are suffering from misunderstandings about Islam and about the Arab people.
- There are Muslim workers who feel that they can not express Islam, because Islam is being equated with something anti-American, or violent. There are a number of untold stories that we're very concerned about.

- Our main priority at this time is to go to the schools and explain what Islam is all about.
- There are cases where politicians or public officers may decide not to speak to a Muslim group for fear of repercussions for being associated with an "anti-American" group. For example, the Muslim Public Affairs Council was misrepresented to a public official as a PLO-affiliated group. He was told that if he were to speak to the Council it would outrage a number of his Jewish supporters. It is an outrage when people seek political advantage by stigmatizing our community.
- We have had our mosques threatened as a repercussion to the Middle East Crisis because people blame us for problems in the Middle East.
- There has been in this latest crisis a significant increase in damage control. The media is much more sensitive to reports of hate crimes and discrimination against Muslims. The media, if anything, is much more intrigued about Islam and what Islam is. There have been several articles about Islam in the L.A. Times and in a number of local papers, as well as stories about our community on network television and local news television.
- The Commission's documentation of what has happened to our community, which has been very persistent and consistently reported to the public and to the media, has helped in sensitizing the media.
- More important, we have gotten the message to certain public officials. For example, District Attorney Ira Reiner's saying he will not tolerate hate crimes, he will prosecute them to the fullest degree. Leo McCarthy introducing a bill to stop discrimination against American Muslims and Arabs. Congressman Mervyn Dymally sponsoring a Congressional bill to do the same thing. Mayor Tom Bradley coming out and saying what the District Attorney said. These statements have helped sensitize the community and are positive progress in dealing with this problem.
- The Federal government still is contributing to the problem. For example, the Justice Department plans to have a detention camp for "undesirables." These are fundamentalists and terrorists. The average person equates these terms with Arab or Muslim. Vice President Dan Quayle said that the three most dangerous movements in the twentieth century were Nazism, Communism, and radical Islamic fundamentalism. The

average person doesn't distinguish between radical Islamic fundamentalism and Islam. Such statements add to misunderstanding, misconceptions, and negative repercussions.

- The media uses the term "holy war." "Holy war" is not recognized by Islam. "Jihad" does not mean "holy war." The L.A. Times told us a year ago that it will not change its definition of "Jihad," "for the sake of brevity." The media sometimes decides to clarify and show the conflicts that we're suffering as a result of misunderstandings. On the other hand, it persists in using these misnomers and misunderstandings that result in the repercussions that they later report on and capitalize on.
- In the media fundamentalism and terrorism are still synonymous with Islam. When you see "terrorist" it usually follows "Muslim" or "Palestinian." Again, the average American is not able to make such a distinction. We don't find such terms used as synonyms associated with any other faith. These words, "terrorist" and "fundamentalist," should never be used to attribute to any group.